

## CHAPTER NINE

# KEEPING STUDENTS' VOICES IN BALANCE

In this chapter we want to examine two common situations that teachers say hinder their attempts to use discussion. These are when a few students talk so much that they prevent others from talking and when students say so little that nothing of intellectual value occurs. Both of these scenarios demonstrate, in markedly different ways, what happens when the contributions of students to the discussion are out of balance. Discussions are out of balance when a substantial number of students feel excluded from the discussion for long periods of time. Discussions are in balance when students feel they have an equal right to participate but also feel comfortable with periods of prolonged silence. As teachers, we want contributions and comments to be spread around group members, but we also want one or two people to have the freedom to engage in an extended, focused conversation while others listen intently. Of course, we never reach a felicitous point of balance where all feel equally free either to speak or to listen during every moment of the conversation. There are always tensions between a commitment to democratic participation and a desire for intellectual depth or between affirming the value of individual contributions and introducing challenging but disturbing new perspectives.

This chapter is intended to suggest ways that these tensions can be felt as more, rather than less, congenial.

## WHEN SOME STUDENTS TALK TOO MUCH

A common scenario in discussion happens when one or two individuals quickly establish their dominance in a group. Sometimes, because of their intelligence, verbal acuity, and self-confidence, the students step briskly into any early moments of silence and deliver a series of brilliant monologues. The other members of the group, confident that a couple of people can always be relied on to say something reasonably articulate, can settle back and let the confident students run the show. At other times, students want to contribute but are prevented from doing so because one or two talkative members are insensitive to the stifling effect their frequent contributions are having. Occasionally, an ideologue uses the group as a forum for conversion.

Garrulous students may seem to most discussion leaders to be a dream come true, rather than a problem to be dealt with. Most of us probably feel our chief difficulty in discussion lies not in people talking too much but in the opposite situation of working with students who resolutely refuse to say anything. But sooner or later all discussion leaders face the scenario where a few students unfairly claim the great percentage of the available time. Sometimes this is due to these students' simple enthusiasm and sometimes to their lack of interpersonal sensitivity. Sometimes the group is replicating political, cultural, and gender inequities that exist outside the classroom. The first step in dealing with this situation is to define what counts as talking too much. The next is to work out why some people are especially talkative while others are silent. Then, on the basis of this analysis, we can decide what we're going to do.

### WHAT COUNTS AS TALKING TOO MUCH?

What counts as talking too much varies enormously according to who is doing the speaking and listening. Factors such as culture, gender, class, and personality shape our judgments on this matter. In Chapter Seven we noted that certain Native American cultures value silence over speech. A Zen Buddhist belief is "those who

know do not speak; those who speak do not know." So judgments of whether someone is speaking too much are unavoidably cultural and always contextual.

It seems to us, though, that the following rule might be applied to determine appropriate levels of conversation. A member of a discussion group is talking too much when others in the group feel consistently that they are denied the opportunity to speak. According to this definition, a discussion that focuses on an extended interchange between two people is fine, provided that others don't feel excluded from joining in if they wished. Some of the best discussions are those in which two or three people spend a great deal of time probing an issue on which they hold differing views or trying to understand each other's contrasting opinions, experiences, and perceptions. Silent members of the group can listen carefully to this discussion and be stimulated by this exchange. There can then be a fruitful period of silence when all ponder their reactions and questions.

One of the most common mistakes discussion leaders make is to cut off prematurely an extended and ever-deepening conversation between two participants because the leader feels that some sort of democratic balance needs to be restored by having other people speak. Yet it may be that this extended, focused conversation between two people is exactly what is needed to take the discussion to a new level of complexity or to make group members aware of previously overlooked perspectives. If, however, this extended conversation is carried on while others are waiting, frustrated, for a pause so that they can jump in, something needs to be changed. Somehow, those who are dominating the discussion by talking too much must be made aware of this fact. The conditions for conversation must be changed to allow others to participate.

How do we know when some students feel that others are preventing them from speaking? One clear indicator is behavior. Students begin to speak but are cut off by others who refuse to give way and continue with their conversational steamroller. People raise their hands to indicate that they wish to join the conversation, but others ignore them and jump in to make their point. Sometimes nonspeakers roll their eyes or trade resigned glances when a particularly garrulous member gets on a roll. Sometimes the hostility is almost tactile as shut-out members glower, frown, feign sleep, refuse to make eye contact with the speaker, and carry on

side conversations. In our experience, however, students will rarely protest directly to a teacher about another student's continued dominance of a discussion. It is as if in so doing they are betraying a kind of implicit tribal allegiance that marks the boundaries between students and faculty.

There is also the problem raised by the culture of cool. To complain to a teacher that one can't get one's voice heard in a discussion is to admit that one actually cares about the conversation. To want to be heard is to declare an interest in learning. In some campus subcultures, declaring this interest in learning is tantamount to committing cultural suicide. It means saying to your peers that you don't think all teachers are jerks or that all education is a con. Showing that you take learning seriously often isn't very cool.

The surest way we have found to determine when some students feel others are preventing them from speaking is through the critical incident questionnaire (CIQ), described in Chapter Three. The CIQ, you will recall, is the one-page form students complete at the end of each week's classes, on which they write about the moments they were most engaged or distanced as learners that week, the actions in class that most helped or puzzled them, and what surprised them most about the class. No names are allowed on these forms. The forms are then collected by the teacher, who prepares a report summarizing the main themes in students' responses. This report is distributed at the start of the next week's classes, and its content is discussed with the whole class.

Because anonymity is guaranteed through the CIQ, students are often willing to use it to raise issues that they would not speak about in public. If some people are unfairly dominating the discussion, comments will start to appear on CIQs. Students will express annoyance that a particular student or students dominated an issue, continued to speak when it was obvious that the rest of the group had lost interest and wanted to take the discussion in a different direction, or refused to let others get a word in.

Of course, one could claim that saying these things under the cloak of anonymity perpetuates a form of cowardice. Colleagues have argued that letting students hide their authorship of critical comments allows them to evade responsibility for their words. They can take potshots at other students and then leave it up to the teacher to sort out the problem. These criticisms are valid. But we

continue to use the CIQ because, on balance, we believe that the honesty it elicits outweighs the potential for abuse. And when students use the CIQ to attack other students in personal or abusive terms, we reframe these complaints as general problems of the democratic process that the whole group must address.

### WHY DO SOME STUDENTS SPEAK TOO MUCH?

Most cases of overly talkative students can be traced to one of five sometimes interrelated causes. First, students expect that talking frequently and at length will win the teacher's approval. In thinking this way, they are conforming to that strand of academic culture that rewards speech. Without an explicit challenge to the norm that frequent speech signifies intelligence, diligent students will do their best to be noticed by getting their comments in speedily and regularly. When teachers tell students that part of their course grade will be based on class participation, students interpret this to mean that they should speak as much as possible. Whether their speech is part of an evolving conversation or whether it asks others to consider new and challenging perspectives is secondary. The task is to say something, anything, to get noticed.

A second reason why some students talk too much springs from a combination of personality traits that impels them into constant speech. We all know extroverted individuals who speak in groups as easily as they breathe. Most teachers are glad to have one or two such people in class because they are a kind of insurance against silence. We know we can rely on a couple of people to answer the questions we pose to a group even if everyone else stays silent. There are other garrulous individuals whose frenetic loquacity springs from a sense of insecurity. Their nervousness and fear manifest themselves in a desperate desire to be noticed by their peers. If they are not the center of attention, they feel they don't exist.

Among a third group of students, dominating a discussion reflects a desire to control and an automatic presumption of authority. Such desires and presumptions spring from a complicated mix of vanity and egomania buttressed by a social order that rewards these behaviors. The readiness to jump into speech and dominate discussions is behavior that is expected and legitimated by the wider society. As Ira Shor (1996) writes:

While teachers tend to reward talkative students who respond to questions, society also rewards tough guys, operators, and empire-builders. As verbal bullies and discursive entrepreneurs, some talky students don't mind being impolite or aggressively competitive. In class, at work, and in daily life, men especially behave in the caste of "rising stars," "big shots," or self-impressed "honchos." The more aggressive male types tend to take over conversations, push their way to the top, or push people around. Others with something to say, who are less aggressive, less rude, less safe in public exposure, or less confident, like many female students and those of color in a white institution, will simply find it harder in a macho climate to take the floor if they have to start speaking without raising hands [pp. 69-70].

For the bullies that Shor describes, a discussion in which their voice is not front and center constantly defining what's right and wrong is a conversation that sadly has gone astray. Such people regard the discussion group as a forum for the airing of their own views, which they assume will be received with worshipful appreciation by those they view as less intellectually endowed.

Fourth, we occasionally have in discussion groups fundamentalist ideologues from across the political and religious spectrum who regard discussion sessions as strategic opportunities for the conversion of others. Convincing peers of the accuracy and validity of these ideologues' opinions becomes the criterion they use to judge whether a discussion is worthwhile. Ideologues of any persuasion are hard-core opponents of democratic disciplines and resist any attempts at self-critique.

Finally, overtalkative students are sometimes the direct result of teachers' acceptance of an ill-conceived metaphor of free discussion. Some teachers recoil from intervening too frequently for fear of distorting or unduly influencing the discussion. They believe that the less they speak, the more authentic, democratic, and free the discussion will be. But it is one thing to refrain from setting out a party line of opinions that students should follow, and quite another to refuse to get involved in regulating student-to-student speech.

Indeed, allowing open-ended, unregulated discussion is the pedagogical version of the free market ideal in which the fittest survive. But the free market patently is not free if by free we mean

that everyone has the same chance to participate and succeed. The market frees those with the greatest resources, power, and privilege to maintain their position of dominance over others. So it goes with discussion. Free discussion seems a worthy libertarian ideal, but in reality this freedom simply allows the strongest to flourish. Those possessing the greatest cultural capital, as Bourdieu (1986) puts it, move to dominate in discussion. Students whose race, class, gender, or personality has helped them grow accustomed to holding forth outside the classroom will simply reproduce that behavior in class unless some preventive brakes are applied.

## WHAT DO WE DO WHEN STUDENTS TALK TOO MUCH?

Throughout this book we have suggested ways of preparing students for discussion, getting them talking, and keeping them involved. Many of these same techniques address the problem of overly talkative students. To recap a few of these suggestions, the problem of some students' talking too much will be greatly diminished if the following six things happen:

1. Teachers model participation in discussion groups early in a course, trying to control how much they speak and making sure they give way frequently to other group members.
2. Teachers help group members research their past experiences as discussion participants so that they can use these to evolve ground rules for conversation. Guidelines are stated in which giving way to others and not holding court for too long are valued highly.
3. Teachers research constantly how students experience discussion and then talk with them about any problems that are emerging.
4. Teachers regularly assign roles to group members, making sure that some of these roles (for example, summarizer and detective) involve substantial periods of silence. They make sure these roles are rotated fairly and consistently.
5. Teachers call for regular periods of reflective silence (perhaps after every fifteen to twenty minutes) when group members think about the important points that have been made,

contradictions that have surfaced, omissions that occur to them, and where the discussion should go next. Students make a few notes on these matters, and teachers begin the next phase of the discussion by asking students who haven't spoken much to read out what they've written.

6. Teachers introduce regular exercises (such as circular response discussion and the circle of voices) and rules for discourse (for example, being able to talk only about other people's ideas or allowing others the floor before you speak a second or third time) that guard against one person's dominating the conversation.

But despite doing all these good things, there will still be times when students speak too frequently and too long. How should we respond? Does our role as teachers include trying to ensure some equity in participation? We believe it does. When we have found ourselves confronting this problem, we have found the CIQ to be enormously helpful.

If a student is unfairly dominating the discussion, this fact will inevitably emerge on students' CIQ forms. Students will comment on the domineering person's insensitivity or egomania, or express confusion over what this person is trying to achieve by shutting out others or surprise that anyone could be so enamored of the sound of his or her own voice. The students who are seen as unfairly dominating the discourse will be identified by name, dress, or reference to specific comments they made. These forms should tip teachers off that students, too, are aware that a problem of unequal discourse exists. Teachers can then act to bring participation into balance, knowing that they're tackling a group problem rather than pursuing a private vendetta against someone they feel is trying to gain control of the group.

Having been made aware that one or two class members are perceived as unfairly dominating the discussion, teachers have two action options. They can begin by addressing this issue with the whole class during the reporting phase of the CIQ. If they do this, they should frame the situation as a general problem of group discourse rather than a specific problem involving any particular student. The conversation that ensues will usually involve a strong



reaffirmation of group rules that ensure equal participation. Sometimes this conversation is enough to keep the dominant student or students in check, at least for a while.

If the problem persists, the teacher needs to have a private talk with the person in question. In this conversation, the teacher should reveal that other students have reported on CIQs that this student is unfairly dominating discussions. Although these conversations are never easy, we have found that citing the CIQs strengthens the effect of the teacher's comments and at the same time precludes the student's raising objections. The CIQ comments serve as a body of unequivocal data that the dominating student must take seriously. Before we used the CIQ, we would both regularly take students aside and communicate our concern that they were speaking too much and preventing others from contributing to the discussion. We didn't do this together, as a pedagogical tag team, or as part of a "good cop, bad cop" routine. The conversation would always be between one student and one teacher, with the teacher expressing, as tactfully and respectfully as possible, some concerns about how the student's excessive talking was having a silencing effect on others.

But the dominant student could always counter with some very reasonable objections. They could ask, "How do you know I'm preventing others from speaking? Has anyone complained to you?" They usually hadn't. Or they could say, "If other students think I'm talking too much, all they need to do is tell me whenever it happens." They usually wouldn't. The talkative student could also argue that as teachers who were used to controlling our classrooms we were threatened by a strong student voice that served as a challenge to our habitual authority. Of course each of us would protest that this consideration had never entered our thinking, all the while being nagged by the suspicion that maybe the student was right.

Presenting to a student CIQ data in which his or her behavior is consistently noted by classmates as interfering with their education makes it much harder to dismiss the problem or rationalize it away. Also, the CIQ data help you avoid being perceived as trying to control a challenge to your power. Instead, you become the conduit of the entire class's concerns. Talkative students find it very difficult to ignore that their behavior is perceived a certain way

by their peers, no matter how unfair or erroneous they feel these perceptions might be.

When presenting students with comments that reflect unflatteringly on their actions, it is important that they know the conversation is confidential. Reassure them that there will be no reference to the conversation in class and that other students will not know that their comments have been passed on. We don't want to shame dominant students in front of their peers, nor do we want students to think of the CIQ as a way to get at students they don't like. So the conversation remains private.

But this doesn't necessarily make the conversation easier. Students may react with a complex mixture of anger, embarrassment, and humiliation. They may deny that they are trying to silence others and maintain that their frequency of speech is just a sign of enthusiasm. They may feel that the teacher or other class members are out to get them. Sometimes resentment can be eased by suggesting specific things the student can do to remedy the situation. We might ask that after making a contribution, the student wait until at least three other people have spoken before speaking again. This focus on future actions gives the student a project to work at and helps save some shreds of self-respect.

In our experience, these conversations have often had very dramatic and positive effects. Students who consistently interrupted to "correct" other students have become more responsive group members who struggle to monitor their contributions judiciously. Of course, this doesn't always happen. There will always be students who remain unmoved by group ground rules, classmate complaints, CIQ feedback, and conversations with teachers. But the frequency of egomaniacal behavior tends to be much reduced when we have presented CIQ data to students.

## WHEN STUDENTS TALK TOO LITTLE

The second discussion scenario we want to examine in this chapter is when students talk too little. A teacher thinks the students are ready for the discussion and throws out a provocative question. A long period of silence ensues, punctuated by much embarrassed shifting of bodies and aversion of eyes. The teacher, thinking the

question was perhaps too opaque, rephrases it in a more direct way. Another period of silence descends on the room. Feeling that things are slipping out of control, the teacher counts silently to ten and then proceeds to answer the question himself. The teacher then presents a second question for discussion and follows this quickly with a lucid response or perhaps a short lecture. The teacher becomes increasingly frustrated by the lack of participation and interprets students' unwillingness to say anything as personal hostility or contempt for the class. Teacher and students are then sucked into a vortex of misunderstanding and mutual recrimination. Both are angry at the other for creating a situation that causes great discomfort.

### HOW DO WE JUDGE WHEN STUDENTS SAY TOO LITTLE?

We argued earlier that the judgment regarding when some students are talking too much should reside ultimately with discussion participants. We feel that the same is true for times when students are saying too little. Students are saying too little when, in their own judgment, the level of silence or lack of participation in class represents a problem for their learning. It should be noted that teachers' and students' perceptions of what constitutes a comfortable period of silence often vary. The two of us are uncomfortable with silence that lasts longer than about twenty seconds. In a class time of fifty to sixty minutes, twenty seconds seems a drop in the temporal ocean. Yet to us, in the middle of a discussion, it can seem an eternity. Just try counting out twenty seconds in your head when you've finished this paragraph and you'll see what we mean.

Shor (1996) reminds us that students are usually given much too little time for thought in discussion. He writes, "In what often passes for classroom 'discussion,' students usually have only a few seconds to respond to the teacher's questions. . . . It's not easy for students to think on their feet in class, especially when presented with unfamiliar subject matter in an alien academic idiom" (p. 78).

Knowing that students need time to think about what they're going to say, we try not to panic when silence lasts longer than twenty seconds. We keep reminding ourselves that silence is crucial to learning. Without periods of reflective analysis, when students are pondering new perspectives and making new

connections, discussions can easily become unreflectively frenetic. Discomfort with silence is part of the reason why students and teachers (ourselves included) fall so easily into the trap of equating speech with intellectual engagement and silence with mental inertia.

Yet silence often enormously enhances learning. It provides students and teachers with time to stumble on relationships between previously disconnected ideas. It allows us to notice omissions or fallacies that we miss in the heat of speech. Silence represents a reflective interlude to "mull things over" that students say is crucial if they are to make sense of new information and unfamiliar perspectives. It also gives us pause to think before we speak out in frustration or anger, so that what we say comes across as a comment on ideas and not on personalities. If silence is serving any of these purposes, it is vital that it not be filled prematurely.

As with the judgment regarding what constitutes too much talk, we rely greatly on the CIQ for guidance. Students will use this form to tell us if and when they're bothered by silence. They will also use it to speak appreciatively of discussions where silence is encouraged as a necessary part of the conversational dynamic. Acknowledging the value of silence takes the pressure off students to act out the role of diligent and engaged participants always ready with an articulate contribution on every issue. In fact, silence bothers teachers much more than it bothers students. Far too many teachers think that if they're not speaking, they're not working. But if good teaching means helping students learn, staying quiet is sometimes the best thing we can do.

### WHAT PREVENTS STUDENTS FROM TALKING IN DISCUSSIONS?

Let's now address the problem of unwanted quiet. Why won't students say anything even when they have ideas to express? The problem can usually be traced to one or more of the following factors:

- *Introversion.* Some students are so shy that nothing short of therapy will embolden them to speak.
- *Fear of looking stupid.* Students won't talk because they're afraid of making a mistake by saying something that's considered

daft, unintelligent, or awkward. This is particularly true if certain students or the teacher are models of confident loquacity.

- *Feeling unprepared.* Students feel they are being asked to talk about something about which they know nothing. They're reluctant to speak until they have had time for thoughtful reflection or research.
- *Fearing a trap.* Students won't speak if they sense that teachers are lying in wait for them, waiting to trip them up for saying something stupid; or teachers might be asking students to unveil themselves without teachers ever having spoken from their own hearts.
- *Feeling unwelcome.* Students feel alien in a new cultural landscape. The speech patterns and behaviors of academics are seen as strange, intimidating, deliberately hostile. In this situation, to contribute to discussion means you have sold out to the host culture, joined the enemy. Silence is an act of honorable resistance, a guarding of one's cultural identity.
- *Bad experiences.* Students may have learned from past experience that speaking out in discussions can trigger attacks by other students or teachers. A student who has been mocked and berated for expressing unconventional opinions, challenging groupthink, or contradicting professorial authority will think long and hard before speaking out in class again.
- *Maintaining one's cool.* Speaking up isn't cool. The culture of cool may be so strong in a group that breaking it by contributing seriously to a discussion means losing friends and status. Students sense that the price of talking authentically is an irretrievable loss of face in front of peers.
- *Reliance on the teacher.* If the teacher's doing all the talking, students won't bother to say anything. If you answer your own questions, interrupt students frequently, and jump in to fill silences, students will soon learn that they don't need to speak. Your conversation with yourself will be quite sufficient to fill up the class time.
- *Lack of reward.* If you say you value discussion but award grades based on students' performance on exams, students will put their energy into working to pass those tests. Preparing for and engaging in discussion will not be seen as worth the effort.

How do you judge which combination of these factors is stopping conversation in a given situation? One approach is to analyze the lack of talk through the four lenses of critically reflective practice (Brookfield, 1995). We can see the situation through students' eyes, we can consult our own personal histories as learners, we can talk to colleagues, and we can review the meaning of recurrent silence from different theoretical perspectives.

The most important lens is that of students' eyes. One way to find out why students aren't talking is to ask them. Of course, the contradiction here is that if they're not talking in the first place, they're hardly likely to open their mouths to tell you what prevents them from speaking! So two courses remain. First, the CIQ will probably be helpful since it bypasses some of the problems raised by students' talking publicly about their dislike of discussions. Asking a group of silent students why they're not saying anything is about as useful as asking rabid ideologues to set out the fallacies in their own thinking. Also, the cloak of anonymity provided by the CIQ allows students to express personal distrust of you and their fear of looking stupid without risking censure or being thought uncool. Second, you can consult students from earlier classes who somehow managed to get past the barriers to speech to become active talkers. Chances are that many of the factors that prevented past students from speaking in class are also present in the current situation.

The lens of your own history as a learner constitutes a second fruitful source of examination. If you're an introvert who has found it stressful to talk in groups and who much prefers to be lectured to, you have a wonderful vein of experience to mine. If you have ever felt the fear of looking stupid or uncool in front of peers or if you have ever mistrusted one of your own teachers, you will understand completely how these feelings kill speech. If you are an academic from a working-class background or from an ethnic minority, you will know from the inside the injuries of class and culture inflicted in discussions. If you are a woman who has spent most of her time learning in mixed-gender groups, you know that men often speak first and loudest and that teachers of both sexes tend to take male comments more seriously. If you are a faculty member who is told that teaching counts for tenure but you see

abysmal teachers with good publication records being tenured, you know all about the need for reward systems to be consistent. If you are a participant in departmental meetings in which deviation from the party line is always punished, you will know how quickly people learn to express ideologically correct views. If you have ever been asked to give your opinion at a faculty meeting on a matter you have never thought about before and about which you have been given no information, you know how helpless this makes you feel. If you have ever wandered into a conference session expecting to hear a paper being read, only to be told by the leader that "the first thing we're going to do is break into small groups and share our experiences," you'll know how cheated students feel when teachers who refuse to disclose their own thinking ask students to reveal themselves to strangers. In consulting our own history, we relearn lessons that we knew rationally but have forgotten viscerally.

Third, colleagues' perceptions of students' silence can open up new perspectives on this situation. Both of us rely on our colleagues in the various "talking teaching" groups to which we belong to suggest explanations for students' silence that we hadn't considered before. Colleagues are especially helpful in alerting us to new perspectives on our own actions. When we complain about students' not taking discussion seriously and not being willing to say anything, our colleagues will often ask us questions that help us analyze this situation in a new way. By asking such questions as "How did you prepare students for the discussion?" "How did you make sure your voice didn't dominate?" "How did you reward students for speaking?" and "How did you earn the right to ask students to disclose something so personal?" colleagues remind us of important dynamics we may have ignored.

Finally, the lens of theory can help us read familiar situations in new ways. Theory can help us "name" our practice by illuminating the general elements of what we think are idiosyncratic experiences. It provides multiple perspectives on familiar situations. Studying theory can help us realize that what we thought were signs of our personal failings as teachers can actually be interpreted as the inevitable consequence of certain economic, social, and political processes. This keeps us from falling victim to the belief that we are responsible for everything that happens in our classrooms.

In her study of beginning teachers, Britzman (1991) comments that "because they took on the myth that everything depends on the teacher, when things went awry, all they could do was blame themselves rather than reflect upon the complexity of pedagogical encounters" (p. 227). This myth holds a particular power over discussion leaders. Teachers who subscribe to this myth believe that students are silent because teachers are not sufficiently animated or because they don't ask sufficiently provocative or interesting questions. It can be an enormous relief to read a theoretical analysis that helps us view the situation differently.

Reading critical ethnographies of schooling, for example, helps us realize that many students' unwillingness to talk seriously is the predictable consequence of a system that forces them to study disconnected chunks of knowledge at a pace prescribed by curriculum councils and licensing bodies. Reading developmental theory in psychology gives us a new appreciation for the risks students perceive when they have to conduct a critical discussion of previously unquestioned assumptions and perspectives. Reading cognitive psychology reminds us that while some people interpret new information verbally and prefer social learning settings, others are more visual learners or like to exercise self-direction.

## RESPONDING TO STUDENT SILENCE

To consider this question, let's take each of the possible causes of silence noted earlier and suggest ways of responding to it.

### RESPONDING TO CRIPPLING PERSONAL INTROVERSION

There's probably not much that teachers can do about this, since a class that meets for an hour or two a week over three or four months hardly provides much scope for substantial developmental change. However, two small steps are possible. One thing you can do is make clear at the outset of the course that talking is not the only way students contribute to discussion and that if students choose to stay silent, they will not be penalized or viewed as mentally negligent. An example of this speech policy is given in Chapter Four. The relief this announcement induces sometimes emboldens very shy students to speak. If students still feel too shy



to speak after such a declaration, at least they don't feel so inadequate and ashamed about their silence.

The other possibility is to make sure that some sort of electronic discussion is part of the course. Students who are too shy to speak up in groups may find it much easier to make their point on a class bulletin board, chatroom, or listserv. The Internet allows students the time and privacy (though not anonymity) to say what they want to say in the way and at the pace they want to say it. Broadening discussion to include e-mail discourse can bring the most introverted students into the conversation.

### REDUCING THE FEAR OF LOOKING STUPID

The fear of looking stupid is a milder form of the kind of crippling introversion discussed earlier. This fear is culturally learned. Students whose past attempts to speak in discussions have been met with ridicule will quickly learn to avoid this embarrassment by not risking any contributions. Four specific steps can help allay this fear.

1. Make sure you begin each discussion with the reminder that in your class there are no stupid questions. Publish the speech policy in the course syllabus, and repeat it regularly in class.
2. If faculty conduct a discussion in front of students at the outset of a course, make sure a debriefing is included. If any of the faculty felt the fear of looking ignorant or unintelligent in the discussion (and chances are they will have), help them talk about this. If students see that the faculty "experts," who supposedly know everything and are possessed of supreme self-confidence, also suffer from this fear, it loses some of its power to stifle speech.
3. Begin a discussion-based course by convening a panel of former students. The panel members are asked to pass on to the new students the best advice they can give on how to survive and flourish in discussions. Chances are good that the theme of looking unintelligent will emerge strongly. Panel members can describe this feeling and talk about how they dealt with it. The new students will feel that their fear is universal, not unique. Knowing that others have shared this feeling and have managed to pass the course will ease their anxieties on this matter.

4. Make sure that before holding a discussion, students are assigned specific tasks or roles that they are to perform in the discussion. Knowing that one has a specific task to perform in the discussion and being able to prepare properly for it beforehand gives a sense of security. It helps reduce the fear that one will be surprised by being asked to speak extemporaneously in the middle of a discussion.

## HELPING STUDENTS FEEL PREPARED FOR THE DISCUSSION

If students don't feel prepared to talk intelligently on a discussion topic, they will generally keep their mouths closed. Who wants to risk saying something foolish, thus earning the teacher's disapproval and the ridicule of one's peers? Chapters Three and Four contain many suggestions for helping students prepare for their conversations.

## COUNTERING STUDENTS' MISTRUST OF YOU

This problem cannot be dealt with quickly or easily. Mistrust of teachers is learned early in many students' lives, and it is reinforced by their experiences and confirmed by their peers' comments. It may be that students won't trust you no matter what you do. But some things are possible.

Conducting a faculty discussion and starting with a panel of former students—both mentioned earlier—also work well to build trust. Modeling your own engagement in discussion earns you the right to ask students to do this. Having previous students talk about the feelings of mistrust they had for you demonstrates that you mean what you say about honoring all voices, no matter how critical.

When you report on students' CIQ comments at the start of a new class, make sure you give full public acknowledgment to criticisms made of your own conduct in and contributions to last week's discussion. Seeing you do this nondefensively, week in and week out, will convince some students that you mean what you say about welcoming criticism. Modeling self-critique this way helps students believe that you can be trusted not to penalize them for saying something that contradicts your own opinion.

Also, if you're asking students to discuss something that involves them in any kind of self-disclosure or personal revelation, make sure you go first. Speak from your own experience about things that are highly personal, that make you squirm with embarrassment when made public, and that part of you would rather keep secret. If teachers give of themselves first, they stand a better chance of breaking down students' fears that their self-disclosures will not be matched by a similar openness on the part of teachers.

## HELPING STUDENTS FEEL WELCOME

Feeling unwelcome and not trusting faculty are undoubtedly linked. However, the sense of exclusion we're talking about here involves feeling separated from other students as well as from faculty. Students who feel that their class, culture, or race marks them as different from the majority often feel surrounded by alien and hostile speech and behavior. We have dealt with this situation at some length in Chapter Seven. Beyond what we said there, we suggest the following actions:

1. In any comments you make about your own expectations of discussion participants, make it clear that you will monitor and act against any speech that is hostile to persons who are not part of the dominant culture. If you are a member of the dominant culture (as many college teachers are), acknowledge your position of privilege. But don't do this in a guilt-induced display of self-abasement. You shouldn't feel ashamed of your class or ethnicity.
2. If you open your course with a panel of previous students, make sure you choose as participants some who will act as cultural brokers. These are minority group students who are trusted by members of that group. Such students perform several functions: they communicate students' concerns to the teacher, they interpret the teacher's behaviors and requests to other students in comprehensible ways that keep the teacher informed about how her actions are being perceived and about how the students are experiencing their learning, and they vouchsafe the teacher's honesty and sincerity to students who would otherwise be skeptical or hostile.

3. If the subject matter allows for this, try to ground the discussion in students' personal connections to the subject itself or in their experiences as learners in this area. An example of this would be to introduce the sociological and anthropological concepts of class and culture to working-class students by asking them to contrast what they consider to be examples of working-class behavior or thought with what they define as middle-class conventions and norms.

### DRESSING WOUNDS THAT BURN

The wounds inflicted from being "put in one's place" in a discussion (whether by a teacher or a group of one's peers) take a long time to heal. Repeated assurances from new teachers that any and all views are welcome and that anyone can say anything without repercussions will be viewed skeptically by anyone who has been chastised in the past for speaking "too frankly" in a discussion. Over time, however, five factors may help assuage this skepticism.

1. If you start a course with a panel of former students and (when you're out of the room) these former students assure new students that you won't penalize them for dissenting or critical views, this goes a long way toward emboldening those new students to risk speaking out.
2. If you as a teacher model your acceptance of critical comments by quoting students' criticisms of your views and actions that have been recorded on the CIQ and if you respond nondefensively and openly to these criticisms, you will gradually convince some people that you mean what you say about welcoming challenges to your ideas.
3. Any time a student makes a comment that's critical of you, thank the person for the comment; if other students jump in to save you, intervene immediately. Say that a commitment to open discourse is indivisible and that you are trying to preserve the critical student's right to voice an honest alternate view. Point out that without critical voices, people get caught in groupthink and teachers get comfortable with their image of their own competence. Ask the critical student to say more about the expressed criticisms and let other students know that you are trying to guard all viewpoints.

4. At the start of the course, you will have developed ground rules for respectful discourse. If a rule requires that dissenting views and critical comments be heard, enforce it. Call a time-out every twenty to thirty minutes, and ask students to do some structured devil's advocacy, arguing against the prevailing tenor of opinion in the discussion.
5. If students are unwilling to offer alternative or challenging perspectives, make sure that you do this yourself. In lectures and in the discussion itself, make sure you regularly argue against your own ideas or against an emerging consensus in the group. Point out ideas and information you have omitted, ethical and moral dilemmas you have glossed over, contradictions in your position you have ignored, and questions you have chosen not to address because you don't have answers to them.

## MAKING TALKING COOL

The culture of cool can be so ingrained in some students that there is often little a teacher can do to overcome this. However, three things are worth considering. First, allowing students to make their comments through e-mail may persuade them that the privacy this affords allows them to contribute without destroying their image. Any behavior that leaves you looking like a teacher's pet in front of your peers can seem uncool. But when peers are present only electronically, the importance of being cool is greatly diminished. You can't hear anyone snicker or see them roll their eyes at your comments when you're sitting alone at a keyboard. And given the curious inversion of status whereby computer proficiency is now actually considered cool, some students may be much more inclined to contribute electronically.

Second, you can try to include on the panel of former students that are brought in at the start of a course some members who are generally regarded as cool. (This presumes, of course, that you are able to identify these people.) The presence of these students does a lot to reassure new students that participating in discussion doesn't blow one's cool. Third, teachers can make clear that the ultimate price students might pay for their coolness is failing. If you truly believe that students who never speak are in some way in dereliction of their responsibilities as discussion group members, you need to make that fact clear early in the course and repeat that

message regularly. You can provide a midterm review of students' performance or some interim evaluations of their progress that makes the consequences of their not contributing very clear. By telling students halfway through a course that if this were the end of the course they would fail because they have never spoken in discussion, you bring home to them the consequences of their silence. Of course, students may choose to continue to stay out of discussions. But at least they can't turn around at the end of the course and complain that they didn't know that speaking in discussions was necessary for a passing grade.

### MAKING SURE TALKING IS REWARDED

We emphasized the importance of creating a reward system for discussion in Chapter Two. Here we would just add the recommendation that you check early on that students understand the reward system that is in place. One useful way to do this is to ask students to write down their responses to sentences like the following:

I know I've contributed usefully to the discussion when I . . .

The best way for me to show I take the discussion seriously is for me to . . .

Professor X will know I'm participating in the discussion when I . . .

If you ask students to complete one of these sentences at the start of the course, in the middle, and toward the end, the responses should tell you whether or not the students understand how discussion participation is defined and rewarded. If there are discrepancies between students' understanding of what participation looks like and what you're expecting, these need to be publicized and discussed with the group concerned.

### WHAT TO ASK YOURSELF WHEN STUDENTS DON'T SPEAK: A CHECKLIST

To end this chapter we would like to propose a list of questions you can ask yourself in the event that discussions are faltering because no one is speaking.

Did students complete preparatory tasks, essays, and other reflective assignments before the discussion began?

Have you built a case for the importance of speaking in discussion by arranging for a panel of former students and cultural brokers to testify to the value of participating in discussion?

Have you modeled public critique of your ideas?

Have you held an opening faculty discussion replete with silence, halting speech, and colloquial language? In the debriefing to this discussion, did faculty acknowledge their fears of looking foolish?

Have you created possibilities for students to participate in the discussion through electronic means?

Have you helped the group set ground rules that deal with hate speech?

Is the part of the grade given for discussion participation defined by specific indicators that acknowledge silent contributors?

Have you checked that students understand these indicators?

Is the discussion focused on an open-ended question of sufficient complexity and ambiguity?

Have you ensured that you've avoided answering the question you've posed, either implicitly or explicitly?

Have you allowed enough time for silence and acknowledged its value in your opening speech policy?

Have you assigned tasks and roles to the group members, especially the rotating role of critical opener?

Have you tried to link the discussion topic to a critical event in students' previous experiences?

Have you researched the causes of the silence through CIQs or some other form of classroom research?

If you have answered all these questions in the affirmative and students still won't talk, perhaps it's time to retreat, temporarily, from your commitment to discussion. A sustained refusal by students to participate in discussion is a message to a teacher to regroup and rebuild. It's their way of telling you to back off, one

of the few forms of sabotage available to disaffected students. You should not construe their silence as a personal failure (though we guarantee this is exactly what the great majority of readers of this book do). Instead, you should realize that practicing the art of democratic discourse is demanding and difficult. There is no shame for them, or for you, if people are not ready for this task. Better for you to take a step backward and work on providing the cognitive and behavioral scaffolding that will help students learn democratic talk. If this means you lecture more, give more directions than you would like, do some intentional education about democratic processes, and work on assigning students simple speech tasks, so be it. You are still engaged—in the early stages—in the project of critical conversation.